

Walt Kuhn

THE ENTERTAINERS



Whitney Museum of American Art

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A turning point in an artist's career can be triggered by any number of events: for Alexander Calder it was a visit to Mondrian's studio; for John Chamberlain it was his first encounter with de Kooning's *Excavation* at the Art Institute of Chicago; for Gauguin it was the experience of an exotic culture; for Stuart Davis it was the support of a generous patron, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. In Walt Kuhn's case, it was an illness and the attending confrontation with mortality that proved pivotal.

In 1925, Kuhn developed a near-fatal stomach ulcer. He was forty-eight years old and had not yet, in his estimation, produced one masterpiece for which he would be remembered. He resolved thereafter to give up other pursuits and concentrate exclusively on painting so as to create a legacy for the future. Within five years, he initiated the

startling portraits of show people that would occupy him for the next twenty years, until his death in 1949. These paintings of acrobats, clowns, and show girls were widely admired for their bold simplicity and emotional intensity; they quickly gained undivided public and critical support.

Though Kuhn had been painting for twenty-five years before his illness, much of his time had been devoted to other activities. Today he is perhaps best remembered for his leading role in bringing modernism to America as a co-organizer of the 1913 Armory Show. An authority on modern art, Kuhn also became the unofficial private art adviser for John Quinn, helping him assemble one of the greatest collections of modern painting and sculpture in the world. He demonstrated great showmanship in other areas as well—supplementing his income during

the 1890s by bicycle racing in county fairs, later by selling “souvenir” pictures in Georgia and Florida, and in the 1920s by writing, designing, and producing vaudeville acts and theatrical reviews. He also designed the interiors of some club cars for the Union Pacific Railroad.

Born in Brooklyn in 1877, Kuhn began his professional career—like many of his contemporaries—as a newspaper cartoonist and magazine illustrator. He made his way to Europe in 1901 to study art, first in Amsterdam and Paris, then at the Academy in Munich, where he fell under the influence of Post-Impressionism and German Expressionism. Back in New York, Kuhn became a forceful champion of this new art and allied himself with a small pioneering group known as the Ashcan School. These artists, organized in opposition to the stifling academic art establishment, were advancing modern ideas in their realist paintings.

The Armory Show was the culmination of their efforts and introduced such European masters as Van Gogh, Picasso, Matisse, and Duchamp, along with such aspiring Americans as Lachaise, Bellows, and Glackens. The personal sense of discovery and the direct contact with European artists that Kuhn experienced as the show’s principal organizer propelled him into a long period of bold experimentation with color and abstraction. He spent years digesting the implications of Cubism and Fauvism before arriving at his own distinctive mature style.

During this period, Kuhn’s work was greeted by a continuous, critical howl. He was considered talented but disappointingly derivative—his sources in the works of Matisse and Derain, in particular, were barely concealed. Eventually Kuhn found his own voice, which successfully merged the figurative realism of the Ashcan group with the high-keyed palette and formal experimentation of the European avant-garde.

In the portraits on view, the performers are presented as still lifes—frontally posed in Kuhn’s studio and removed from the activity of their typical surroundings. They appear rigid and hieratic against a solid ground that suggests the austere simplicity of the Archaic Greek and Etruscan art Kuhn so admired. Though Kuhn eschewed the dramatic possibilities of gesture, his performers are nonetheless charged, robust, and physical. The outlining of their figures, their massive volumetric solidity, and Kuhn’s vigorous brushwork led Henry McBride to conclude that Kuhn was the most masculine painter since George Bellows. In his own person, the tall, sturdy Kuhn projected a mythic American he-man aura, enhanced by the ten-gallon hat he habitually wore.

Kuhn’s own experience as a performer and showman drew him to his subjects—not to the star performers, but to ordinary working people, members of the chorus or troupe. In his portraits, he consistently explored these people as types rather than as individuals. Expressionless, nonchalant, perhaps numb from overwork, Kuhn’s performers are often dressed in astounding costumes and headgear and then presented with a dignity more common to official portraiture.

There is a paradoxical quality that gives Kuhn’s entertainers an emotional strength: a somewhat sad facial expression coupled with a sense of classical composure; an inert figure painted in a dissonant, yet dynamic color combination; an excruciating tawdriness elevated to a sophisticated aesthetic experience. As Edward Alden Jewell observed half a century ago, Kuhn’s portraits are epigrammatic and “lead the eye inward while the brush builds outward.” Although they were appreciated during the 1930s, when they made headline news on the art pages, since Kuhn’s death in 1949 these works have fallen out of favor. Gathered together here for the first time in a New York museum, they make a powerful, lasting impression, one that transcends the vagaries of fashion.

LISA PHILLIPS
Associate Curator

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.

Clown with Black Wig, 1930

Oil on canvas, 40 x 30
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New
York; George A. Hearn Fund, 1956

The Blue Clown, 1931

Oil on canvas, 30 x 25
Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; Purchase 32.25

Show Girl with Plumes, 1931

Oil on canvas, 40 x 30
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Trude, 1931

Oil on canvas, 68 x 33 $\frac{1}{4}$
The Santa Barbara Museum of Art,
California; Gift of Mrs. Walt Kuhn, In
Memory of Walt Kuhn

Sybil, 1932

Oil on canvas, 68 x 33
Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr.

American Beauty, 1934

Oil on canvas, 33 x 65
The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia;
on loan from the collection of
Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.

Fancy Dress, 1936

Oil on canvas, 40 x 30
Collection of Sid and Diana Avery

Trio, 1937

Oil on canvas, 72 x 50
Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center; Gift of
the El Pomar Foundation

Lancer, 1939

Oil on canvas, 45 x 26
The Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester,
New Hampshire

Clown in His Dressing Room, 1943

Oil on canvas, 72 x 32
Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; Gift of an anonymous
donor 50.1

Three-Cornered Hat, 1943

Oil on canvas, 25 x 30
Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York

Cover: *Fancy Dress, 1936*